THE IMAGE OF IVAN THE TERRIBLE IN RUSSIAN FOLKLORE

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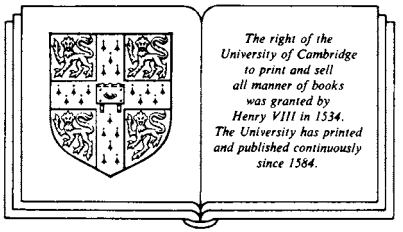

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CONTENTS

TEXTS

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INTRODUCTION: THE MYTH OF THE TSAR

The belief of the peasantry in the justice and goodness of the tsar was an enduring feature of Russian history, which disappeared only in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution. Popular monarchism was not of course unique to Russia – indeed, royalty is surrounded by a mystique of some kind wherever it appears, even in modern constitutional monarchies – but the strength and persistence of the myth of the tsar is generally considered to have been exceptional. Further research may however lead to a reassessment of this received wisdom: Daniel Field has recently expressed scepticism about conventional approaches to the subject;[1] and studies of popular monarchism elsewhere may enable us to place the Russian phenomenon more firmly in its comparative context.[2] It may simply be that the 'myth of the tsar' has attracted particular attention because of the role it is believed to have played in the perpetuation of the autocratic system into the twentieth century.

Russian conservatives before the revolution could point to manifestations of the myth of the tsar as evidence of continuing popular support for the monarchy. In the eyes of the revolutionaries themselves, the 'monarchist illusions' of the peasantry contributed to the stability of the old regime and frustrated their efforts to mobilise the people against the autocracy. Yet paradoxically, most of the major popular uprisings in Russia were governed by the myth of the tsar: the great peasant rebellions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were either directed against the tsar's advisers, supposedly on behalf of the tsar, as in the Razin revolt of 1670–1, or led by pretenders claiming to be the true tsar, as in the Pugachev rising of 1773–5.[3] In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, too, peasant insurgents claimed that they were acting in accordance with the wishes of the tsar.

Popular monarchism, then, assumed different forms at different times.

[1] Daniel Field, *Rebels in the name of the tsar* (Boston, 1976).

[2] For brief but suggestive comparative discussions of popular monarchism see E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive rebels*, 3rd edn (Manchester, 1971), pp. 118–21; and Peter Burke, *Popular culture in early modern Europe* (London, 1978), pp. 150–5.

[3] A useful review of the popular revolts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is Paul Avrich, *Russian rebels, 1600–1800* (London, 1973). On pretenders and the myths associated with them, see Maureen Perrie, '"Popular socio-utopian legends" in the Time of Troubles', *Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 60, no. 2 (April 1982), pp. 223–43; and Philip Longworth, 'The pretender phenomenon in eighteenth-century Russia', *Past and Present*, no. 66 (1975), pp. 61–83.

At the simplest level, it involved a belief that the tsar was benevolent in his intentions towards the common people, the *narod*, and that any manifestations of injustice and oppression must therefore emanate not from the ruler himself, but from his evil counsellors, 'the boyars' – the nobles, landowners and officials who disregarded and perverted his wishes. Such a belief could be used to legitimate protest against the authorities, 'in the name of the tsar'. Sometimes, however, the existence of injustice was explained in terms of the illegitimacy of the reigning monarch, who was then perceived not as a true tsar, but as a usurper. This belief was frequently exploited by pretenders claiming to be the rightful tsar whose restoration to the throne would establish an era of freedom, justice and prosperity.

Another dimension of popular monarchism, however, and the one with which we shall be concerned in this study, is the idealisation of individual rulers in the past as 'good tsars', the champions of the cause of the people against the boyars who oppressed them. In Russian folklore, this role was played by Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great.

A number of explanations have been offered for popular faith in the tsar, whether in terms of the backward, superstitious and patriarchal attitudes of the peasantry, or in terms of the functions of the monarchy, which surrounded itself with the symbols and trappings of religious veneration and secular pomp. The ideology of tsarism, like that of monarchism elsewhere, presented the ruler as the fount of impartial justice and the symbol of state power, standing above class and faction.[4] Official rhetoric proclaimed his benevolence towards all his subjects, irrespective of status, and, to the extent that the state was independent of society, his actions seemed at times to demonstrate his concern for the welfare of the people, as in the Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861.

In spite of these explanations, however, the major problem with the myth of the tsar, for historians and others who seek to investigate it, has been its basic falsity, for the Russian monarch was not the benefactor of his people, but bore the ultimate responsibility, as head of state, for their exploitation and oppression.[5] This problem is particularly acute in the case of Ivan the Terrible, whose reign witnessed arbitrary mass terror, progressive enserfment of the peasantry, and widespread economic devastation as a result of the disastrous Livonian War. On the credit side, admittedly, there were some successes against the Tatars, which led to territorial expansion on the Volga and in Siberia. But it is certainly puzzling, to say the least, that such a ruler, widely regarded by contemporaries, and by many historians, as a tyrant at best and a madman at worst, should have become a folk-hero to the Russian people.

[4] For a review of the official 'myth of the tsar', see Michael Cherniavsky, *Tsar and people; studies in Russian myths* (New Haven, 1961).

[5] This point is made most forcefully by Field: *Rebels in the name of the tsar*, pp. 17–18.

Various solutions have been offered to the problem of the apparent discrepancy between Ivan's historical reputation and his folklore image. Some pre-revolutionary scholars suggested that the myth of the tsar in general was so strong in Russia that it overrode the negative qualities of the real Ivan as an individual, and enabled his actions to be presented in a favourable light. Others, however, have rejected the premises on which the idea of a discrepancy is based, by reassessing either Ivan's historical reputation or his folklore image. Ivan was admired by some nineteenth-century Russian historians for his contribution to the strengthening of the state, and the idealisation of the Terrible Tsar reached an apogee in the Soviet Union in the Stalin period, when Ivan was depicted as a progressive ruler who had overcome feudal fragmentation. Historians who admired Ivan as a great statesman could point to the folklore as evidence that he enjoyed the support of his people, even if the boyars and foreign contemporaries reviled him. Some scholars, however, have reinterpreted the folklore about Ivan, viewing it as essentially hostile towards him, as befits the popular response to a cruel tyrant. This approach has found particular favour in the Soviet Union since 1956, when Ivan's historical role, like that of his admirer Joseph Stalin, has been subject to critical re-evaluation.

A further problem is posed by the fact that the folklore about Ivan was not recorded until many decades or even centuries after his death. Unlike the situation in Western Europe, where from the sixteenth century onwards folksongs and tales were transmitted in printed form, in broadside ballads and chap-books, Russian folklore belonged almost exclusively to the oral culture until the eighteenth century, when illustrated booklets (*lubki*) and other cheap reading matter for the common people first became popular; and it was only from the late eighteenth century, under the influence of the Romantic movement, that folklore was recorded by collectors directly from oral performances. The earliest Russian texts of folklore works about Ivan are found in eighteenth-century manuscripts. Admittedly the motifs of some of these songs and tales can be found in sources of an earlier date, notably in accounts by foreign travellers, and in some Russian chronicles, but even these do not date back much further than the mid seventeenth century, and it is in any case unclear how far they reflect a genuinely popular oral tradition.

To what extent, then, can the depictions of Ivan which are found in the comparatively late folklore records be accepted as indicative of contemporary sixteenth-century peasant attitudes towards the Terrible Tsar? Here again we are faced with a bewildering range of answers. Folklorists of the pre-revolutionary 'historical school', which remained influential until the 1930s, regarded the texts recorded in the nineteenth century as the corrupt and garbled relics of almost-forgotten originals. Some Soviet

commentators in the Stalin period argued that the later transcripts represented the people's creative reworking of older folklore themes in the light of their subsequent historical experience; while some more recent scholars have reverted to the earlier nineteenth-century view that the modern recordings preserve virtually unchanged the essence of their sixteenth-century prototypes.

The present book represents an attempt to come to grips with some of these problems. The first part reviews the controversies which have surrounded the folklore about Ivan the Terrible in Russian and Soviet folkloristics. In the first chapter, we examine the often conflicting views of Ivan's folklore image which have been put forward in the secondary literature, paying particular attention to the interaction of folkloristics, historiography and politics in the Soviet period. The second chapter discusses the debates on other major issues: the historical basis of the folklore, and the probable date of its first composition. In the second part, we attempt to deal with these problems directly, by an analysis of the folklore texts themselves. Chapter 3 offers an interpretation of the image of Ivan which is presented by the folksongs and tales recorded from the late eighteenth century onwards. The following two chapters are concerned with the issue of when and how the folklore image developed. On the assumption that if the folklore record preserved sixteenth-century originals intact, it would have a strongly based and verifiable historical content, Chapter 4 assesses the extent to which the folklore accurately depicts the reality of Ivan's reign. The fifth and final chapter approaches the issue from a different direction, examining sources of a non-folklore character, dating from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, which serve as indirect evidence of the development of Ivan's popular image in the period of almost two hundred years which elapsed between his death and the registration of the first Russian works of folklore in which he appears. The second section of the book comprises a series of annotated translations of selected folklore texts about Ivan, which are intended to assist readers to form their own judgments of the popular image of the Terrible Tsar.